

Summary of Discussion Summation of the NASSS International Graduate Students' Plenary Session Workshop

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The first plenary session for the International Graduate Student Seminar, conducted in the morning of Monday July 27th, 2009 was presided over by Professor Takakazu Yamagishi. This session was attended by all Keynote Speakers, Professor Werner Sollors, Professor Eric L. Muller and Professor Marie Gottschalk, as well as by the three professors from the ASPAC region Professor Kim Sung Ho, Professor Qian Mansu and Professor Qamber Rukhsana. The session was conducted in two parts. Part one focused on the question, "How to Succeed in Academic life", and part two focused on the homework assignments provided by the keynote speakers before the start of NASSS.

After the Vice President of Nanzan Professor Noboru Kinoshita opened the first session with some introductory and welcoming remarks, professor Yamagishi led a discussion dealing with the differences in PhD programs in the United States, Japan, Pakistan, Korea and China. He highlighted the importance of this questions and the need for students to understand the PhD programs both domestically and internationally. Professor Yamagishi then randomly asked five graduate students to detail their own PhD programs and to describe some of their personal experiences and information about their home institutions. Students were successfully outlined in detail not only the differences found among international programs, but also striking domestic differences with regards to coursework burdens, part-time teaching employment and financial burdens all necessary for successfully obtaining a PhD. The difficulties of entering the workforce were also discussed as a result of the recent economic downturn.

The professors were then given the floor and asked to give comparisons and any crucial advice on their own programs' admission criteria, regulations, financial burdens, academic responsibilities and obligations for PhD students and professors alike. The last section of the first session then moved again to the keynote and ASPAC speakers to discuss how they personally selected their dissertation topic, as well as the system that was utilized in developing it further. Professor Marie Gottschalk discussed her decision in not choosing the traditional path in choosing her topic. She detailed experiences about reentering academia after a career in journalism and after spending some time abroad in China.

Professor Gottschalk and Muller also mentioned their decision to change their second research projects that was unrelated to their initial project, and why that can be an unwise career decision to make, especially in academia. All professors agreed with Professor Gottschalk's insistence that students choose a dissertation that they are absolutely passionate about. It may take up to ten years to be truly finished with a project and sticking with one topic over the years can be challenging. The professors all agreed that it was in the student's best interest not to be overly concerned with the future of the job market and stressed the importance of having a "Plan B", should a career in academia at a major research university not work out. Professor Sollors pointed out that 'luck' can be a big part of gaining a tenure track position at a leading university. Gender in academia was also discussed as well, a point that had been previously untouched despite the fact that just over half of the graduate students were women. Professor Gottschalk took the time to point out the particular struggles that women face as they try to amalgamate success and balance in their family lives as well as in their careers, a problem that endures to this day for many women academics. All professors agreed that personal relevance and importance to you are necessary as dreary fieldwork and long hours will certainly be in store before your dissertation is complete. However offbeat a topic may seem, if one believes in it, it may be worth the research time and energy. Ruksana Qamber talks about the strange job offers that she has received, from many different countries, as a result of her unique and comprehensive dissertation research. Professor Qian talked about the personal nature of her dissertation topic and coincidental nature and timing of her particular choice. She talked about her time growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution and her limited opportunities for academic research as a result of her country's domestic political turmoil. She then chose her dissertation topic as a direct result of her personal experiences in China, obviously a topic that had great personal meaning to her own life. Professor Muller lastly added that a dissertation topic should be one that you feel contains an element that you can contribute to the world. He also talks of the practice of "branding" of academics and the little understanding and acceptance of the academic world to cope with the decision to change your topic during your career. Success in academia can be very much a result of one being "branded" as an expert in a given topic. There is the freedom to choose a research change, but limitations in career opportunities and successful networking can arise. He spoke of his own initial career researching American Constitutional Law and criminal procedure for years before changing to legal history and focusing on the incarceration of Japanese Americans. The ensuing confusion among his fellow colleagues as to what his *true* expertise was, showed the sometimes inflexible and fickle nature of the academic world.

In conclusion, the floor was opened and graduate students were able to ask the professors questions about their own choices and decisions throughout their careers. Topics discussed were relationships with academic advisors and

mentors, the importance of fostering a few strong bonds with other colleagues or department professors and the harsh realities of the lonely road that a scholars often travel when struggling to finish their PhD's. Advice ranged from the importance of simply *finishing* a dissertation, "A dissertation shouldn't be brilliant, it should be done", and that at the end of the day, a career in academia is just that, a job that should not take over your life in an unhealthy way. Learning to distract your mind with other passions or things while you are experiencing a particularly "impassionate" phase in your research is not only realistic but necessary.

Lastly, professor Yamagishi asked the floor to focus on the troubles particularly encountered by international students when studying abroad and advice on how to best approach the admissions departments in various universities.

The second half of the plenary session was used to create discussions on previously assigned homework questions. Keynote speakers were given thirty minutes each to further comment on their choice of questions and then receive questions from the graduate students. The assignment questions were as follows:

Prof. Marie Gottschalk

1. The political development of the United States is often described as "exceptional." In what specific ways is the U.S. case exceptional? Is the U.S. case more exceptional than that of other developed democracies? Does the focus on U.S. 'exceptionalism' help or hinder our ability to understand and analyze political developments in the United States?
2. What is gained by analyzing public policy from a historical and comparative perspective? What, if anything, is lost?
3. What are the major trends in the study of American politics in U.S. colleges and universities? How do these trends compare with major trends in American studies in Japan and elsewhere?

Prof. Werner Sollors

1. How can knowledge of languages other than English contribute to a fuller understanding of American literature and culture?
2. What are the possibilities you see for international collaboration in studying the literature and culture of the United States?

Prof. Eric Muller

1. In the context of assimilation and Americanism, in what ways is the history of Japanese Americans similar to that of other racial minorities in the United States? In what ways is it different?
2. How does the situation of Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II compare and contrast with the situation of Americans of Arab ancestry and Muslim faith in the United States since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001?

We believe this plenary session was useful to students as it not only covered

realistic academic advice from all of the professors, but also included personal and well meaning advice “from the heart”. This often included comments in relation to the growing relevance and importance of *work-life balance* in today’s world and must have been an invaluable experience for the students. Students were given the opportunity to communicate directly with professors, thereby representing a valuable goal of the International Graduate Student Seminar for meaningful interaction between international students, American students, keynote professors and professors from the ASPAC region. The session concluded at 12:00 pm, whereupon all participants proceeded directly to the extracurricular excursion for the remainder of the day.